What does Islamic Centrism in Egypt Strive for?:
Reflection on Ṭāriq al-Bishrī's Formulation of "*Tayyār Asāsī*"

KURODA Ayaka[*]

1. The Evolution of al-Bishrī's Intellectual Journey

Egypt has been known as one of the hubs of Islamic centrism. Besides being the home of al-Azhar and non-violent, gradualist Islamic movements, the presence of independent scholars and writers espousing a centrist interpretation of Islam has been making Egypt's cultural and political scene much richer.

Among these independent thinkers is Ṭāriq al-Bishrī (1933–), who is also famous as a jurist and a historian. Along with other independent thinkers such as Salīm al-ʿAwwā, Kamāl Abū al-Majd, Fahmī Huwaydī and in some cases Muḥammad ʿImāra,[1] al-Bishrī is often referred to as a member of the Islamic centrist school in Egypt, a loose intellectual circle independent of any official institution or political organization. They are distinguished by some methodological features such as the logical fusion between *al-salafīya* and *tajdīd*, a comprehensive understanding of Islam, equilibrium between the fixed texts and the modifiable elements in Islam, and so on, and their application to the themes of the practice of Sharia [Polka 2003: 42–44]. As Jacob Høigilt points out, "most treatments of centrism are content with sweeping generalizations," however, the previous studies haven't clarified a distinguishing feature of each centrist intellectual [Høigilt 2011: 49]. As a result, the diversity within this Islamic centrist school remains unclear, which leads to the lack of a comprehensive understanding of this school and the Islamist political and cultural scene in Egypt.

This is also true of al-Bishrī's thought.[2] In order to fill this gap, this article attempts to clarify a part of his thought through the analysis of his concept of "*tayyār asāsī*, the 'basic current' in a society)."

First of all, based on the previous researches and interviews, including the most detailed biography authored by Ibrāhīm al-Bayyūmī Ghānim, the following passage gives a rich account of the intellectual journey he went on.

Ṭāriq al-Bishrī was born in Cairo in the interwar period, where mass movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Young Egypt arose under the pressure of British forces

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* Ph. D. Candidate, Graduate School of Asian and African Studies, Kyoto University, Japan

1 Researchers are divided whether Muḥammad ʿImāra should be included within this intellectual circle. For example, R. W. Baker says that "the Islamist camp is represented by Muhammad Emara, whose views at times come close to Ghazzaly's own, but just as often express a far less open and inclusive spirit," including al-Qaraḍāwī and Muḥammad al-Ghazālī in the circle of "the New Islamists" [Baker 2003: 278n5].

2 Following this criticism, Høigilt introduced Muḥammad Ḥāfiẓ Diyāb's critical study in Arabic into the Western scholarship as a sole exception [Diyāb 2002]. As to extensive studies on al-Bishrī in the Western scholarship, Roel Meijer made a critical study on his historical interpretation more than 25 years ago [Meijer 1989].

remaining after the ostensible independence.

The circumstances in which he was brought up were deeply connected with both traditional and modern Egyptian society, as is represented by his family's career. His grandfather, Salīm, was a Grand Imam of al-Azhar (in office: 1900–1904, 1909–1916). His father, 'Abd al-Fattāḥ (d. 1951), was a chief of the Court of Appeals. His uncle 'Abd al-'Azīz is a renowned writer who graduated from al-Azhar. The development of the urban culture, the expansion of journalism and the emergence of modern elites in Cairo had an explicit influence on him. At the same time, since his maternal family lived in the countryside, al-Bishrī came in touch with rural life, where Azhari graduates and Sufi orders played a significant role [Ghānim 1999: 78].

After graduating from the Faculty of Law, Cairo University in 1952, he served as a judge on the State Council (*Majlis al-Dawla*), an administrative court in Egypt until his retirement. In his youth, he was influenced by such scholars as 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Sanhūrī, a jurist who contributed to the modernization of Islamic law, and Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, whose work, *The Creed of Muslim* (*'Aqīda al-Muslim*), he read for the first time in 1951 [Ghānim 1999: 86–87; Adīb 2015]. Deepening his interest in Western philosophy, political thought, and revolutionary history, al-Bishrī began to espouse socialism. He wrote for some famous secularist and leftist magazines, *al-Kātib* (The Writer), *al-Ṭalī'a* (The Vanguard), and *Rūz al-Yūsuf* from the 1960s to 1970s [Ghānim 1999: 88].

Al-Bishrī recalls his relationship toward religion at that time as "knowledge on Islamic jurisprudence which his profession depends on," "with the blessing (*rizq*) of the God in his reason and his heart," and "his life and death by the will of the God." He describes himself at that time as a "pure secularist (*'almānī quḥḥ*)" [Ghānim 1999: 88], which implies, however, how religious Egyptian secularists are.

As is well known, al-Bishrī is one of the thinkers who left socialism for the Islamic trend with the defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war as his turning point.

Before this ideological conversion, his interest was in the independence of the nation (*istiqlāl al-waṭan*). In his socialist view, this independence was to be achieved domestically through economic development and externally through the unity of the Arab nations [Ghānim 1999: 90].

However, the defeat in 1967 forced him into self-criticism alongside other thinkers like Ḥasan Ḥanafī, a philosopher advocating the "Islamic Left (*al-yasār al-Islāmī*)," Muḥammad 'Imāra, a prolific Islamic writer, and 'Ādil Ḥusayn (1932–2001), a leading intellectual of the Socialist Labor Party. Al-Bishrī questioned himself about the cause of the defeat and the way the Arab-Islamic world could recover from it. He finally realized that a nation's independence is not only achieved through economic factors, but also through building a national identity concerning its own civilization [Ghānim 1999: 91–97]. Thus, he realized the role of Islam as

a fundamental identity in his society. Though he abandoned socialism and secularism, in this way, his main interest in national independence has never changed.

As for his intellectual influences during this period, al-Bishrī ran across the work of Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, a distinguished moderate cleric, through *al-Muslim al-Muʿāṣir* (Muslim Today) magazine in 1974/75 while he was seeking for his intellectual alternative [al-Bishrī 2004: 358]. He stopped writing for a while and attempted to rewrite every work. For example, he completed the first draft of one of his main works *The Political Movement in Egypt* in 1969, which was published in 1972. However, he published a new edition in 1983 with a lengthy introduction entitled "the criticism and the reexamination" after his ideological conversion.

As for recent public appearances, al-Bishrī became internationally known when he was appointed by the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) to the chair of the committee charged with the revision of the Egyptian Constitution after the resignation of Mubarak. In addition to his fame as a person of integrity, this appointment is regarded as the army's consideration for the Muslim Brotherhood due to al-Bishrī's sympathy to Islamism. SCAF seemed reluctant to draft a new constitution and hoped to promptly assure the interests of the army. However, after al-Bishrī publicly manifested the possibility to draft the new constitution after its tentative revision, SCAF later had to support the transitional plan to draft a new constitution in response to the public opinion supporting his statement [Suzuki 2013: 88].

Today al-Bishrī describes himself as "a person who advocates the standpoint of citizenship (*muwāṭana*), who emphasizes the role of political groups with a religious base, and who stands at the cross point of all national currents (*al-tayyārāt al-waṭanīya*), especially the Islamic current and the ethno-national current (*qawmī*)" [al-Bishrī 2012: 41].

In this way, al-Bishrī's thought represents the three mainstream ideologies the Egyptian nation has been holding: Egyptian nationalism, Arab nationalism, and Islamism. Today he is known for the voluminous works, *The Muslims and Copts in the Framework of the National Community* and *The Political Movement in Egypt*.[3] In the former work, he argued how religious communities are included within the larger national community from the viewpoint of modern Egyptian history, and how the public services are opened to non-Muslim citizens living in modern states in terms of Islamic jurisprudence based on the methodology of *ijtihād*.

Two key concepts of al-Bishrī's thought are "*al-mawrūth* (what is inherited)" and "*al-wāfid* (what comes from the outside)." These concepts emerge in all of the works written by al-Bishrī from 1980s [Ghānim 1999: 98]. He explains "*al-mawrūth*" as "values, order,

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3 This work was initially published under the title *The Political Movement in Egypt from 1945 to 1952* on the cover. The book was reissued later under the changed title *The Political Movement in Egypt from 1945 to 1953*. While the new title is found as a revised second edition published in 2002 at least, the present author doesn't have the accurate information on the timing at which the title was changed.

ideas, habits, ethics, and cultivation which are passed down from past generations to the present society" [al-Bishrī 1996a: 9]. On the contrary, "*al-wāfid*" is explained as follows;

> "……the influx of ideas and organizations (*tanẓīm*) accompanying political, military, and economic trends. What hadn't come before by our own will come to us by force. Besides its details and what was finally useful, things have reached a kind of duality (*izdiwāj*) or division (*infiṣām*). It has permeated into most of the foundation of thought, education, politics, economy, and administration. Secular thought stands alongside religious thought. The education imported from the West stands alongside religious education. The legal system applied from the French or other legal codes stands alongside, or to the disadvantage of Sharia Law; a ruling system based on an individual stands alongside a representative system which doesn't have anything to do with the former……" [al-Bishrī 1996a: 12].

> "……We, in the Arab Islamic society, live in two kinds of societies, and life is divided between different modes in the spheres of ideas, behavior, social activities and relations, institutional structures and organizations. This makes a serious gap in the society and cracks its structures and forces. As a result, people are forced to be opposed to and in conflict with each other. The social order falls into paralysis. Standards for judgment and validity contradict each other" [al-Bishrī 1996a: 12–13].

Al-Bishrī has always been struggling to fill the gap between *al-mawrūth* and *al-wāfid*, to deconstruct this dichotomy and to restore the lives of Muslims torn between this duality. In the recent work analyzed below, he also presents a solution for the problems which Egyptian society has been suffering from since the modern times.

2. The Formulation of *Tayyār Asāsī*

Naḥwa Tayyār Asāsī li-l-Umma (*Toward a Basic Current for the Community*) was initially published in 2008 from Al Jazeera Center for Studies in Qatar. Later it was published in 2011 from *Dār al-Shurūq* in Cairo. In this recent work, al-Bishrī proposes shaping an integrated current which is able to deal with the problems of the nation. While this is the first work with the prefix "*tayyār asāsī*," he seems to have been formulating this concept since mid-1990s at least.[4]

As for the background to formulating the concept of *tayyār asāsī*, he explains that serious conflicts exist in the society and each social force cannot exert its full ability as it

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4 For example, al-Bishrī seems to have rewritten the article "the Cultural Situation for the Dialogue" published in 1994 for the chapter two in *Naḥwa Tayyār Asāsī li-l-Umma*. For the original article, see [al-Bishrī 1996b: 82–93].

lacks cooperation with the others.[5]

> "The basic current (*al-tayyār al-asāsī*) in a country is based on the greatest common denominator (*akbar qāsim mushtarak*) among the political, social, and cultural currents within it. In other words, it refers to general characteristics which are found in the claims arising from diverse currents. In their tackling the demands of a particular historical phase, these characteristics give rise to what they agree upon" [al-Bishrī 2011: 7].

The term "*al-tayyār al-siyāsī al-asāsī*," which seems almost interchangeable with *tayyār asāsī*, is described as "the comprehensive framework for the groups in the community" while allowing them to keep their plurality and diversity [al-Bishrī 2011: 31].

In fact, the study of Nādiya Muṣṭafā suggests that one of the pillars in al-Bishrī's thought is to fill the gaps in the community, to bring about mediation, and to fix the cracks found in the social structure and the people's mode of thinking [Muṣṭafā 1999: 179–180].[6] Furthermore, the concept *tayyār asāsī* is likely to be an alternative to transcend the duality, aspiring for more than merely fixing cracks in the society and people's mode of thinking.

He frequently uses the personal pronoun "we" in this work, which implies 'we Egyptian citizens.' Though he has been referred to as a moderate Islamic scholar, his Egyptianness strongly molds his intellectual framework. Looking back on Egyptian modern history and the circumstances surrounding Egypt and the third world, especially from the 1980s to 90s, he insists that two issues are at the root of every problem people have been facing for the last 150 years up to the present: fear of the foreign enemy and colonialism (*qaḍīya al-istiʿmār*) and the way to run the state and society effectively(*qaḍīya niẓām al-ḥukm*) [al-Bishrī 2011: 18]. As is shown in his formulation of *al-mawrūth* and *al-wāfid*, he asserts they still live in the period of colonialism and resistance to it [al-Bishrī 2011: 49]. In connection with the latter issue, he regards it as a problem that the modern centrally-governed state in Egypt takes on too many functions itself. It doesn't realize the political will held by the national community. In such a way, the disequilibrium between the state and the national political community emerges [al-Bishrī 2011: 25]. In order to get rid of this imbalance, the secondary groups and forces in a society should play a role to put pressure on the state: journalism, parties, private organizations, and so on [al-Bishrī 2011: 26–7].

Then, what kind of elements constitutes the fundamental will of the community?

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5 See his talk in al-Jazīra TV program to introduce the work he published [al-Jazīra 2009].

6 Her study focused on the reading of his series entitled "*the Contemporary Problem over Islam*" in mid-1990s. Related to the point stated above, she partly introduced al-Bishrī's concept "*tayyār asāsī*" and "*mashrūʿ waṭanī* (national project)," more focusing on the latter. The present article deepens the analysis of these key concepts in order to understand his political manifest.

Many previous researches have pointed out that an emphasis on dialogue is a characteristic common to centrist Islamic thinkers [Baker 2003].[7] Another work depicted how Islamic centrists can play a role as moderators between secularist and Islamist camps through their speech [Polka 2003].[8]

However, the concept of dialogue in al-Bishrī's ideas is much broader than an exchange of opinions in newspapers, symposiums and even in an assembly. He emphasizes the importance of dialogue, not only as the means to mutual understanding but as a negotiating process to integrate the claims brought up by varied streams. He finds a path to dialogue in the activities of social movements. In general, social movements provide a lot of means to express their manifestos such as social appeals, protests, formulation of governmental programs, and so on [al-Bishrī 2011: 32–33].

According to him, *tayyār asāsī* is crystallized as an extension of "the national project (*al-mashrū' al-waṭanī*)." Differences of opinions and conflicts are inevitable among the political/social forces. When they try to come together, such differences have to be adjusted in the process to elaborate the national project [al-Bishrī 2011: 31]. This is another key concept of his thought. According to al-Bishrī, the national project is composed of several aims of greater importance set by a generation at a historical stage. Neither people nor groups create the national project. Its contents are naturally extracted and crystallized from cultural, political, and social movements [al-Bishrī 2011: 36].

> "At first, there are no sophisticated compositions (*'anāṣir mutakāmil*) or vocabularies (*mufradāt*) (in order to claim and conduct the aim) in the national project. Neither does it seem to be harmonized continuously nor to be homogenized (*mutajānis*). (On the contrary,) a kind of contradiction appears between them……each politic force captures another. Many parts in a single project attack each other. Therefore dialogue over the national project has an importance……Through dialogue, people are able to sort out political, social, cultural vocabularies and claims, and then they can clarify what contributes to the public project and what isn't likely to do so. Finally, dialogue makes clear the relative importance of each (political/ social) vocabulary (among political groups) in the process of harmonization and homogenization" [al-Bishrī 2011: 32].

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7 To take an illustration, the work of Kamāl Abū al-Majd, who advocated the centrist understanding of Islam, *Ḥiwār lā Muwājaha* (*Dialogue not Confrontation*) prefixes the very word "dialogue" to the title of the book.

8 In connection with this point, Jacob Høigilt indicated, in his stimulating work, that some centrist thinkers like Huwaydī and 'Imāra close the door of dialogue due to their often-inflammatory tone in spite of their intention, as well as some secularist writers [Høigilt 2011]. In contrast to this, Høigilt implied some writers showed a similar moderate tone despite their different ideological tendencies, taking al-Bishrī and Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd as an example.

While he aspires for balance between the state and the community from the vertical perspective, he also considers achieving relative balance between secondary groups in the community in such a way.

Perhaps, the citation above conveys the impression that al-Bishrī holds a totalitarian view to some extent. However, the following chapter shows that al-Bishrī attaches greater importance to active social institutions rather than the state.

In the chapter entitled "the role of organizations (*mu'assasāt*)," he argues the need for an organizational/institutional structure which enables social forces to retain the power [al-Bishrī 2011: 45–46]. According to him, a human-being has a manifold sense of belonging in essence: genealogical as in tribe or clan, religious as in *milla*, or *niḥal* and sect; and other aspects such as belonging to Sufi orders, various schools of thought (*madhāhib* and *madāris*), guilds, villages, and so on [al-Bishrī 2011: 25–26, 45].

However, without an authoritative intellectual framework in the society and in politics, new modern institutions created by Muhammad Ali lacked a link with the traditional social units and internal intellectual strength. As a result, they showed weakness when they came into contact with the Western invasion [al-Bishrī 2011: 50–51]. His modernization policy destroyed the plural communities indigenous in the society, ruined their sense of belonging, and transformed the social relationship into one which the external-imposed principles regulated. The administration and state's power swelled after the modernization of Muhammad Ali [al-Bishrī 2011: 58–59]. Therefore, when the Orabi revolution failed in the defeat of 1882, no forces in the Egyptian society could take up the initiative, although the social/political systems had matured to a much better condition than at the beginning of 19th century, with the modernization of the army, the introduction of the representative systems, the development of journalism, and the emergence of political movements [al-Bishrī 2011: 59].

We can find his tendency from a state to a society in the course of his argument. He aims to revive a sense of belonging lost by the destruction of the traditional social structure. It is because, in his view, unity brought by a strong sense of belonging will contribute to the achievement of goals held by the community. Moreover, social forces must take the initiative for reform through the transition of the role from the state to private (*ahalī*) organizations in the society.

He repeatedly points out the importance of the democratic system, regarding it as the basis for dialogue and as a system through which people and political/social forces express their political will. In addition to the pluralism and political equilibrium repeated in the main argument, he adds comments intentionally to the topics related to the political concepts in Islam. First, al-Bishrī regards "citizenship (*muwāṭana*)" as guaranteeing equality within a political community as the basis for constructing a democratic society. It implies the equality between Muslim and Christian citizens, which he has been trying to formulate through

his intellectual efforts since the 1980s [al-Bishrī 2011: 62–63]. Second, he negates the contradiction between democracy and *al-shūrā*,[9] equating the latter to the principle of majority rule. However, what is unique to him, is that although he identifies *al-shūrā* by "the general principle (*al-mabda' al-'āmm*)," arguing that the general principle has diversified forms and can be modified in accordance with the historical conditions or the demands of a community's surroundings. The matter is left to the community which forms to apply the systematization of *al-shūrā* in conformity to the principles of political representation, collective participation in politics, and pluralism. In the same way it is left to the community as to which opinion and schools (*madhāhib*) to apply from Muslim scholars on the matter of Sharia, while following the authoritative framework of Islamic jurisprudence and legislation from the principles of Sharia [al-Bishrī 2011: 73–74].[10] Rather, the community is bound to choose and formulate an appropriate political/legal form for itself to conform to both its historical and present surroundings and the principles stated above.

In conclusion, he summarizes what is needed for the basis of democracy as follows.

First, a community has to achieve the independence of its own civilization by producing its cultural and historical fruits; these consists of faith, culture, integration of languages, and a common spiritual structure particular to the community. Second, through continuous efforts to stave off external pressures, political independence must always be pursued. This enables the political will of the community to be liberated from the external order. Third, economic independence is also indispensable to achieving national security. This independence also involves the effort to achieve economic development on its own and to avoid external pressure. Fourth, in order to protect the will of the nation, the community must consider how to protect national (*qawmī*) and regional security in an appropriate form while keeping the balance between political and military affairs.

In addition, he demands the following matters be achieved in order to maintain an effective democratic system [al-Bishrī 2011: 75]. First, a political community, which enjoys coherence and close internal connection, must be established. Each secondary group should be represented within it in accord with their scale and relative importance in the society. Second, the common aims must be established so that all the political/social forces within the community are gathered together. Third, related to the points above, the forces which have influence in the cultural, social, and political life ought to enjoy legitimacy. All of such forces are respected as indispensable constituents of the political community. Fourth, such groups and forces are to be organized under effective organizations so that they can express their own will through them. Finally, the foundations (*mu'assasāt*) of a state have to coordinate together

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9 In fact, he didn't argue the concept of *al-shūrā* much in his works. The role of Islam as the authoritative reference (*marji'īya/maṣdarīya*) in the state and society seems more essential to his political idea.

10 Although al-Bishrī didn't discuss the matter of Sharia in the modern Muslim society in this work, this subject constitutes his main interest. For his reflection on this theme, see [al-Bishrī 1996c, 2015].

and its subordinate institutions (*ajhiza*) must also be well organized.

In his discussion, a religious element seems not to be manifested explicitly. However, the religious element constitutes an indispensable part of identity. His argument is considered to be neither Islamist nor secular. As Roel Meijer puts it, al-Bishrī "does not believe that Islam provides for a state. Islam is, according to him, rather a cultural value system held in place by the Shari'a," al-Bishrī does not start from the theory of "al-Islām dīn wa dawla" [Meijer 1989: 39]. By his attitude he locates himself in a unique position in the intellectual landscape over Islamism in Egypt and urges us to reconsider his simple labelling as an "Islamist intellectual" without consideration of his uniqueness.

3. Concluding Remarks

The formulation of *tayyār asāsī* makes up only a part of the wide-ranging topics al-Bishrī treated in his intellectual life. However, *Naḥwa Tayyār Asāsī li-l-Umma* is a significant work in which multifaceted intellectual dimensions of al-Bishrī are integrated: a historian, a legal professional in a state institution, and an Islamic thinker with a nationalist tendency.

As a prospect which his concept of *tayyār asāsī* opens, his emphasis on the vital role of private associations and plural social units anticipates the development of civil society on the theoretical level.

The present article affirms that *tayyār asāsī* is concerned with one of the most significant points in al-Bishrī's intellectual components: avoidance, overcoming, and deconstruction of dichotomist conflicts. Elaborating the concept of "*ḥiwār*" as a dynamic means to sophisticate a national project, he elevates the dialogue to an essential element of the political process. Besides his authentic understanding of Islamic jurisprudence, his aspiration to an integrated national stream instead of conflicts makes him a distinguished moderate Islamic scholar.

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